



2022-23 VICTORIAN BUDGET SUBMISSION

**VICTORIAN PUBLIC
TENANTS
ASSOCIATION**

December 2021

Who We Are

The Victorian Public Tenants' Association (VPTA) is the voice of public housing in Victoria.

As the peak body representing existing public housing renters and those on the waitlist, our goal is to provide advice to renters, and to improve and expand the public housing system in Victoria. Although not formally part of our role, we also assist community housing renters where possible.

We believe all social housing renters deserve a representative voice, regardless of their specific tenure type.

While our work is in Victoria – we are the only peak body in Australia which exclusively represents public housing renters or people who live in social housing.

We undertake systemic advocacy and provide policy advice to the Victorian Department of Families, Fairness and Housing ('the Department'), undertake community engagement work and operate a free and confidential telephone advice service. In the 2020-21 financial year we assisted more than 500 residents and applicants with in-depth advice and assistance.

About this document

The bulk of this submission focuses on new, small projects, that the VPTA team believe will deliver considerable improvements for current and future public housing renters.

This is done in recognition of the amount of work ongoing which will direct the future regulation of, and strategy for, Victoria's social housing.

The VPTA maintains that there are a number of larger, system level issues regarding workforce capability, sector funding, equal renter representation for all social housing residents, and of course, stock availability, which must be addressed. These are outlined more briefly in the 'Ongoing Priorities' section.

Ongoing Priorities

This submission was drafted in late 2021. At the time of writing, the sector is awaiting finalization of key, government led policy initiatives. Namely, the independent Social Housing Regulatory Review and the publication of the 10 Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy.

The VPTA anticipates that these documents will provide future direction on a number of key, structural issues within the social housing system that the organization has been actively advocating to resolve.

These include the future growth of publicly owned and managed housing, independent representation for all people who live in social housing, a properly resourced housing workforce to meet the needs of renters and sustain balance for staff, and ensuring adequate, long term funding of the community sector so that services like ours can plan for the future with confidence.

Given the work that is currently ongoing, this submission does not include specific recommendations on these issues.

In no way is the VPTA's commitment to these important issues weakened.

While the Big Housing Build is a significant investment in social housing growth, more will need to be done beyond this project in order to keep pace with existing demand for housing assistance now and in the future.

The VPTA continues to strongly encourage the Government to include an ambitious target for growth in the final 10 Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy, and to guarantee that publicly owned and managed stock grows alongside properties that are either owned or managed by community housing providers.

Further, when the Big Housing Build is complete, around 30 per cent of Victoria's social housing homes will be managed by community housing providers. The formal role of the VPTA should therefore be expanded to ensure that all people who live in social housing have equal access to a free, independent and confidential advocacy service. Although the VPTA Tenant Advocates will assist any social housing renter who requests help in practice, the lack of formal jurisdiction and associated funding would prevent the VPTA from being able to service all renters who contact the free advice line if a larger number of community housing renters were to request assistance.

Already, the VPTA is under-staffed. If one of the team were to become seriously unwell or take extended leave, the organization would not be able to afford to introduce a new team member to take over the work, nor would existing staff have capacity to manage the workload. As a result, there are a significant number of renters that the VPTA could not assist.

Additionally, changes to the Superannuation Guarantee and in Award rates have led to significantly increased employment expenses across the community sector. For organisations like the VPTA, the impact of these increases has meant that when roles become vacant, there is insufficient funding to rehire a new staff member as

that portion of wages budget gets redistributed across other staff in order to subsidise the additional expense.

To date, annual indexation has not covered these expenses. While indexation is intended to maintain the real value of funding agreements, in reality it does not.

The VPTA urges Government to create more certainty and security in funding arrangements for the community sector, so that services like the ones run by the VPTA and our colleagues can continue to be available to shine a light for Victorians experiencing periods of darkness.

Small initiatives, big impacts

Maintenance Contract Reboot

Have you ever had a contractor come to your home to fix an issue, only to be made to feel that your home wasn't worth their time and that the work didn't warrant their best effort? This is the experience that people who live in public housing are increasingly reporting to the VPTA.

People who live in public housing already experience a high level of stigma in the community, it is untenable that publicly funded maintenance contractors are attending public housing properties and causing the residents to feel disrespected.

Focus group participants told the VPTA and Red Road Consulting that maintenance contractors were rude or dismissive when attending their homes. They said:

“I felt like their attitude was ‘we can't help’. That I was irrelevant to them. I could even feel hate in their attitude. They just feel like they're the boss and don't position themselves as service providers. It feels like they think they are watching a joke.”¹

“I think there's also an attitude about some of the tradies or some of the maintenance people that just because you're a public housing tenant, you don't care...they'll just do substandard work. And, you know, you should feel lucky that we're even doing that.”²

“It's very much a struggle to get good workmanship. Very much a struggle to get them to do the job. And then it's always half assed...The workmen come here, and they say, ‘Why do you bother?’ Because it's my home...this is my home.”³

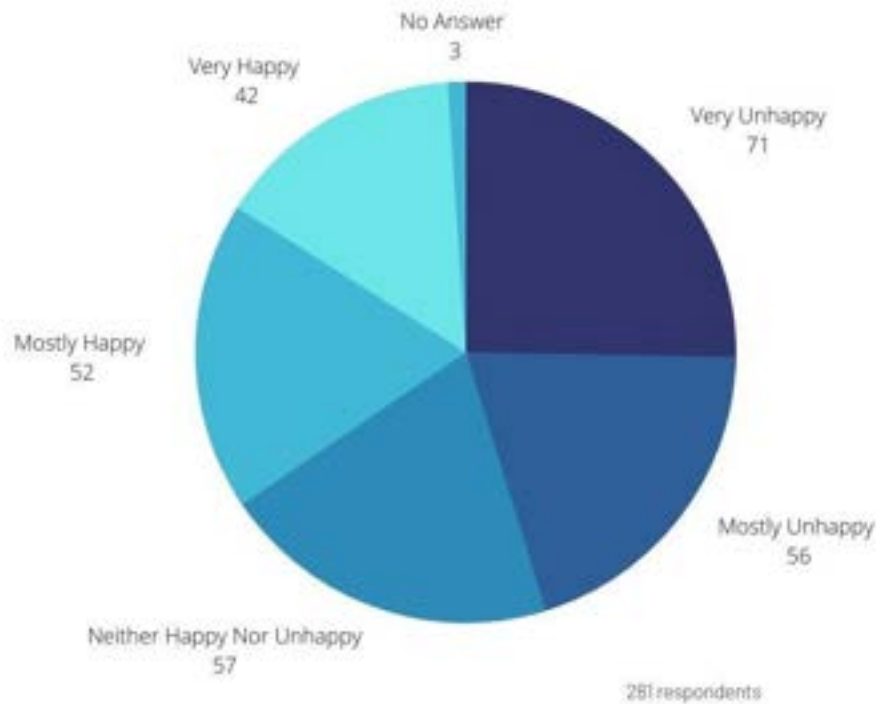
Relatively high levels of reported satisfaction to quality control surveys (83 per cent satisfaction with urgent jobs, and 75 per cent satisfaction with non-urgent jobs) are inconsistent with experiences shared with VPTA staff and suggest that this issue is underreported to the Housing Call Centre. Particularly as around one quarter of public housing respondents to a recent survey conducted by the VPTA and Red Road Consulting for the Social Housing Regulatory Review Panel ('the public housing SHRR survey') indicated that they were very unhappy with the repairs and maintenance service that they had received.

¹ Red Road Consulting, 'Social Housing Regulation Review: Public Housing Tenants' Engagement Findings Report,' 2021, pg 13.

² Ibid, pg 25.

³ Ibid, pg 24.

In the last 12 months, how happy were you with your repairs and maintenance service?



Source: public housing SHRR Survey, survey responses, unpublished

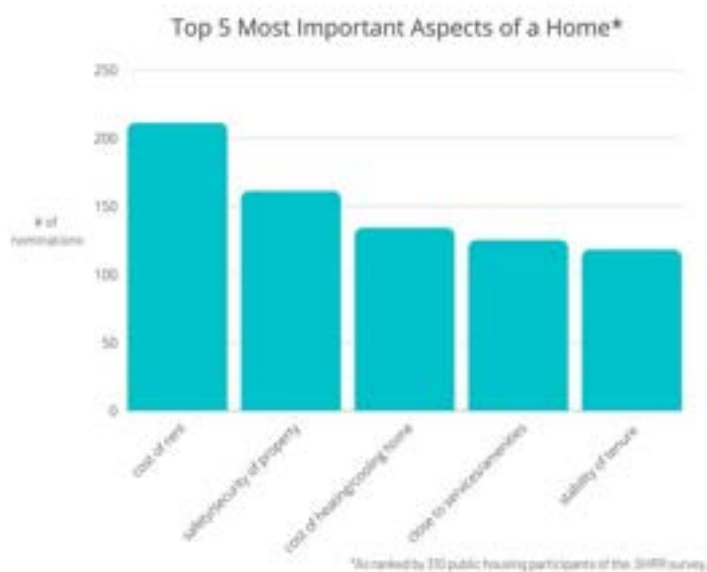
Recommendation:

1. Trial a more immediate feedback mechanism, such as SMS based surveys to renters on the day that maintenance was scheduled, asking whether the contractor attended, showed ID, was respectful, etc.
2. Moving from contract area to contract area, undertake a performance review of each maintenance provider, and impose all available penalties up to and including cancellation of the contract where adequate service has not been delivered to renters.

Solar Panels for Public Housing

Installing solar panels on public housing properties would positively impact renters, the environment and the economy.

More than half a million Victorian homes now have rooftop solar panels.⁴ Public renters remain the last group of Victorians with no opportunity to access assistance for the installation of solar panels. This is despite these homes being some of the least thermally efficient housing stock⁵, people living in public housing spending more on energy than other Victorian households while also being among the most at risk of experiencing energy hardship.



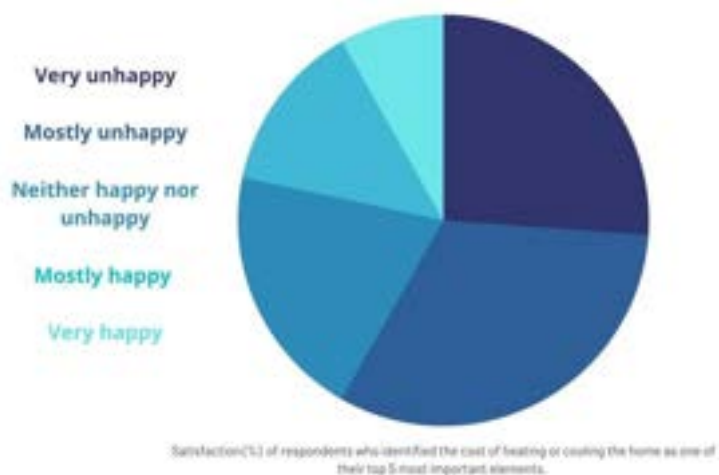
The public housing SHRR survey shows that people who live in public housing rate the cost of heating and cooling their homes as one of the most important elements of their property but tend to be dissatisfied in this area.

Source (both): public housing SHRR Survey, survey responses, unpublished

People who live in public housing are eager to take advantage of the opportunity to lower household electricity bills as well as help the environment.

A recent trial in Western Australia found that installing solar panels on public housing properties saved some households up to

How happy are you with the cost of heating/cooling your home?



⁴ Victorian Government, 'Victorians Embracing Solar at Record Levels', accessed online, www.premier.vic.gov.au/victorians-embracing-solar-record-levels, 23 November 2021.

⁵ Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, *Warm, cool and energy-affordable housing policy solution for low income renters*, 2020, pg 5.

\$200 in the first six months of the program.⁶

Providing solar panels to Victorian public housing properties would not only deliver much needed household savings on energy bills, but also create jobs. In August 2020, the Queensland Council of Social Services ('QCOSS') and other community sector organisations put forward the emPOWER Homes project to the Queensland Government, a \$215 million dollar package including:

- \$12 million investment in engagement and household energy audits
- \$50 million investment in rooftop solar panels for social housing properties, and
- \$153 million investment in energy efficiency upgrades.⁷

The QCOSS modeling suggested that this program would create more than 1,800 jobs and deliver household savings up to \$730 per year for the households with solar panels installed.⁸

Similar benefits could be delivered in Victoria. Based on analysis conducted with the Victorian Council for Social Services, the VPTA estimates that a similar program, with investment in rooftop solar for around 24,000 of Victoria's public housing dwellings, partnered with an engagement and education program which assisted households to make the most of their new panels and efficiently manage energy usage inside the home could generate household savings of up to \$800 per annum, and create 1,000 jobs.



Recommendation:

3. Draw on experiences in other Australian jurisdictions to provide rooftop solar panels to appropriate public housing dwellings.

⁶ Government of Western Australia, 'Public housing solar trial saves tenants hundreds', Friday 3 September 2021. Accessed online: <https://www.mediastatements.wa.gov.au/Pages/McGowan/2021/09/Public-housing-solar-trial-saves-tenants-hundreds.aspx>

⁷ Queensland Council of Social Services, 'emPOWER Homes: A Social Homes Energy Support Stimulus Proposal', August 2020, pg 3.

⁸ Ibid

Digital Inclusion for Public Housing Renters – Buffering

“What we’ve seen over the Covid period is an acceleration of digitization of basic services and which has left families even further behind...there’s a new form of exclusion that’s happening for those people.”⁹

In 2021 the community is relying on technology more than ever – to access work opportunities, to communicate with loved ones across the globe, and, during the pandemic, to learn and to work from home.

Yet many people who live in public housing continue to experience significant difficulty in accessing the internet and participating in this new digital landscape. Researchers at the University of Melbourne have identified that around one third of the resident at the Carlton public housing estate do not have access to the internet.¹⁰

This is not a localized issue. Community organisations around the State have created an alliance (Community Agencies for Digital Inclusion) to seek a solution to this growing, ever more pressing, problem and the City of Yarra has initiated a trial to provide free wi-fi through it’s Smart Public Housing program.¹¹ The VPTA is anecdotally aware of a number of similar, localized projects in early, pilot stages.

The 2021 Dropping Off the Edge report reconfirms that a lack of home internet access is a form of social exclusion, which can lead to financial disadvantage. Further, young people who do not have access to the internet at home experience significant difficulty engaging and participating in school. The advent of Covid-19 has only accelerated the digitization of learning, work, and provision of crucial community services.¹²

Digital exclusion can arise for a number of reasons and is not limited to a lack of income – although for some that is a key factor. Other contributing factors are uncertainty about entering a contract with a provider, and access to devices. If the digital inclusion deficit in public housing is not addressed now, these communities will continue to fall further behind, and experience greater levels of exclusion.

⁹ Jesuit Social Services, ‘Dropping off the Edge 2021: Persistent and Multilayered Disadvantage in Australia,’ 2021, pg 163.

¹⁰ University of Melbourne, ‘Understanding digital inequality in Victoria,’ (website), <https://socialequity.unimelb.edu.au/projects/understanding-digital-inequality-in-victoria>, accessed 25 November 2021.

¹¹ City of Yarra, ‘Smart Public Housing Project,’ (website), <https://www.yarracity.vic.gov.au/the-area/smart-technology-and-innovation/smart-public-housing-project>, accessed 25 November 2021.

¹² Jesuit Social Services, ‘Dropping off the Edge 2021: Persistent and Multilayered Disadvantage in Australia,’ 2021, pg 28.

Recommendation:

4. The Victorian Government should undertake a literature review and evaluation of various trial projects currently in process, with a view to committing funding and scaling those which show proof of concept.
 - a. In scaling successful trials, Government should ensure funded projects meet the needs of public housing renters across all dwelling types.

Tenancy Supports

To holistically address homelessness, Victoria needs both more publicly owned and managed housing, but also more supports.

More resources for the community sector organizations that deliver this type of assistance can ensure that tenancies are sustained long term, and people do not cycle in and out of experiences of homelessness.

The VPTA supports the VCOSS recommendation to provide early intervention support to help people hang onto housing by creating a dedicated Homelessness Prevention Program.

Our sector continues to experience significant pressure, with high demand and limited ability to scale services in response due to low funding levels. This has certainly been the experience of the VPTA.

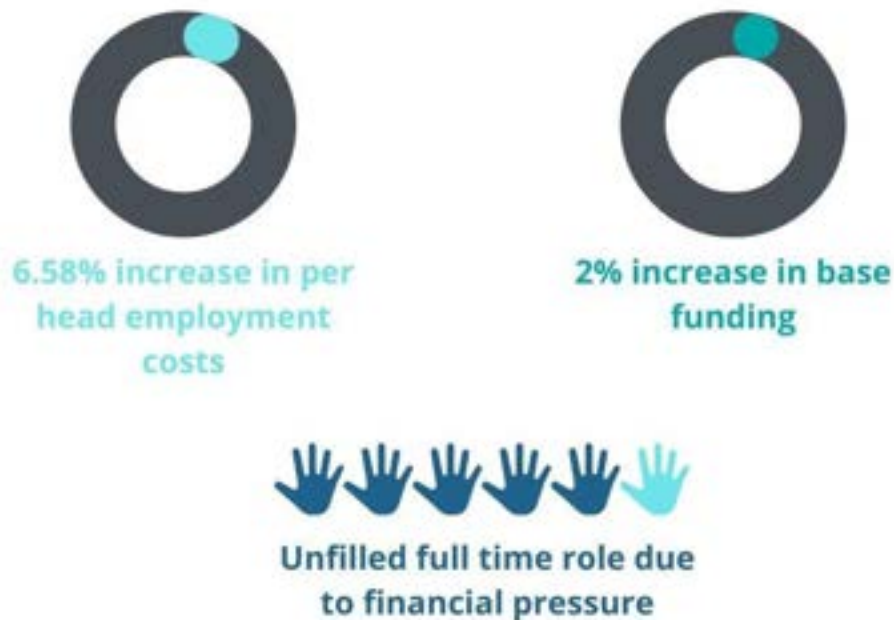
The number of cases that VPTA Tenant Advocates assist renters with continues to grow. In the first quarter of 2021-2, Tenant Advocates had already opened 173 cases. If demand continues at this pace, the team will experience an increase in demand of approximately 30 per cent in the four years since 2018-19.



*2021-22 figures are a projection, based on an assumption that workload from quarter 1 remains consistent throughout the year.

In that same time period, employment expenses alone have grown at a pace far greater than indexation of funding. As a result, there is less capacity to complete more work.

Between 2020-21 and 2021-22...



Recommendations:

5. Accept the recommendation of VCOSS to create a dedicated Homelessness Prevention Program, in consultation with the community sector.
6. Ensure organisations which provide tenancy supports, like the VPTA, are adequately funded to enable adequate staffing of services to meet growing demand.

Summary of Recommendations

1. Trial a more immediate feedback mechanism, such as SMS based surveys to renters on the day that maintenance was scheduled, asking whether the contractor attended, showed ID, was respectful, etc.
2. Moving from contract area to contract area, undertake a performance review of each maintenance provider, and impose all available penalties up to and including cancellation of the contract where adequate service has not been delivered to renters.
3. Draw on experiences in other Australian jurisdictions to provide rooftop solar panels to appropriate public housing dwellings.
4. The Victorian Government should undertake a literature review and evaluation of various trial projects currently in process, with a view to committing funding and scaling those which show proof of concept.
 - a. In scaling successful trials, Government should ensure funded projects meet the needs of public housing renters across all dwelling types.
5. Accept the recommendation of VCOSS to create a dedicated Homelessness Prevention Program, in consultation with the community sector.
6. Ensure organisations which provide tenancy supports, like the VPTA, are adequately funded to enable adequate staffing of services to meet growing demand.

Conclusion

The VPTA would be happy to discuss the matters raised in this submission with Government in more detail.

Please do not hesitate to contact the office if you wish to arrange a meeting.